
25 Years of Occupational Scientific Diving at RBINS



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In 1999, the Management Unit of the Mathematical Model of the North Sea and the Schelde Estuary (MUMM), which manages the Research Vessel *Belgica*, launched a call for interest in civilian scientific diving operations from the vessel, registered as a Belgian navy ship. Many issues had to be addressed, resulting in a first one-week cruise in July 2000, which was postponed in July 2001 due to adverse weather. The target was to start a faunal inventory of a Belgian water shipwreck. This was seen as a feasibility study for that research tool. From that moment until 2004, a cruise was granted each year to develop this highly efficient method of sampling hard substrates. In 2004, the first funded project, BEWREMABI SPSD II, was awarded, enabling us to begin occupational scientific diving aboard the R/V *Zeeleeuw* managed by VLIZ, a partner of the BEWREMABI Project. From that moment onward, the number of projects involving this tool increased; see the project table. Among others, it made possible the rediscovery, after Gilson, of the refuge zones of the Hinderbank (project HINDERS, SPSD II, BELSPO). Intensive fieldwork using an in-house-developed methodology enables the collection of unique samples for the long-term project WinMon.BE (2008-2025), which monitors the newly implemented Belgian energy production zone and other projects, with a focus on targeted monitoring. At the same time, RBINS initiated the structuring of the Belgian professional sector for managing occupational scientific diving (BWGSD), hosted by BELSPO. In 2008, RBINS organised the first training for personnel affiliated with a Belgian scientific institution, building on the 2003 training and aligned with the European Scientific Diving Panel (BE founding member) Level of competency for scientific diving at work, level ESD. In 2025, RBINS, with the support of VLIZ, organised the 17th edition of the BSD core training and trained approximately 100 occupational scientific divers. The RBINS scientific diving team operated more than 4500 MD (Man Dive), mostly in the offshore North Sea, providing support to more than 25 funded national or international research projects, and all that safely - no major accident, few incidents- keeping in mind the ‘Safety First’ philosophy that is the fundamental of this activity.

Occupational Scientific Diving is defined as “*Occupational Scientific Diving (OSD) is science-led diving and is needed to support professional research and education and protect, conserve, and monitor the natural and cultural heritage environment. Operated as a work activity, OSD is not to be confused with recreational nor commercial diving. OSD exists in a health and safety framework that involves certified occupational scientific divers, diving officers, hyperbaric physicians, scientific project leaders, heads of laboratories, administrators, and legislators.*” Feral & Norro (2024).